

“Forward” Thinking: Will Straw and the future of online political journalism (Guest blog)

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AOL's \$315 million acquisition of The Huffington Post this week has infused new life into debates about the viability of such news and blogging websites as profit-producing investments. Could a HuffPost work in the UK?

POLIS intern Beth Lowell reports on one political wonk's view of the future of British online political news media.

Will Straw (ippr), speaking to political communications students at LSE saw an opening in the UK market for “evidence-based analysis on British politics, policy, and current affairs.” In response, he created [Left Foot Forward](#) in 2009, based on the model of their sister site, [Think Progress](#) as well as other US sites, including the Huffington Post. The site was ranked number 1 on Total Politics' September 2010 list of the “top 100 left-wing blogs” and Straw was named on their list of the “top 50 political influencers.”



While Straw raised many interesting points about the emergence, influence, and future of political blogs, it was his discussion of the medium as a virtual public sphere for aggregated discussion and debate between audience members that grabbed me most. It seems to me that it is this function of blogs as a forum for users to congregate, engage, and interact that makes them unique and continually popular.

In his recent piece [“Why the NYT will lose to HuffPo”](#), Felix Salmon ponders why the Huffington Post re-posting of a New York Times article is likely to inspire more reader response than the original article on the Times' site. Salmons attributes some of this trend to pure aesthetics, noting “the NYT page is like walking into a library, while the HuffPo page is like walking through Times Square.” But beyond the neon lights and flashy logos, there is also a deeper attention to user-friendly content at work. Salmon observes, “the HuffPo page is genuinely, compellingly, interactive — it's almost impossible to visit it without finding something you want to click on. Like! Comment! Tweet!” The Huffington Post is designed to inspire audience engagement and it does so through attending to audience interest.

This same attention to user satisfaction as an avenue to interaction was clear in Straw's lecture. His main inspiration for creating Left Foot Forward was to remedy a void in the UK political blog landscape. In serving this audience need, his site also constitutes a central community for dedicated followers to congregate.

When discussing the site's audience, Straw described an engaged group with a core of consistent commenters and a welcome contingency of new or infrequent contributors to the discussion. What impressed me most was Straw's own knowledge of this group. At one point he referred to a user who frequently commented on blog posts. Without ever having met this audience member, or interacted with him outside the site, Straw had deduced his profession, region of residence, and general political leanings. He also expressed a sincere appreciation for how these characteristics contributed positively to the discussions on the site. This awareness and acknowledgement of audience contributions sets blogs such as Left Foot Forward apart, drawing users in rather than simply pushing content out.

The economic and logistical details of whether or not sites such as Straw's can turn profit in the future is still up for debate, though he expressed optimism for The Huffington Post's prospects in his presentation. However, with engaging design, content, and core communities, it is little wonder that these spaces enjoy more user loyalty and interaction than more static news sites. As for the future of the AOL/Huffington Post deal, and the medium as a whole, as with most ventures on the Internet, only time will tell...

The report by POLIS intern Beth Lowell.

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